Helping UNICEF classify and route text messages

Working with UNICEF and the U-report system

Infrastructure problems in many African countries makes issues such as famines, clean drinking water, HIV/AIDS, and most recently, Ebola, particularly challenging to address. Although less than 15% of households in Sub-Saharan Africa have access to electricity, more than 70% have access to a mobile phone.

UNICEF has found a way to empower people to communicate their needs and concerns by capitalizing on this prevalent access to phones. They launched an initiative called U-report, which is an innovative text-message based social monitoring system. U-report is free and easy to join. Every week, U-report users receive a poll question about their environments, resources, and the problems that they face.

U-report’s success and complications

The U-report initiative has become so popular that, in addition to poll responses, U-report analysts received thousands of unsolicited text messages every day. These text messages appear in the same inbox as poll responses, and it can be difficult to filter through them to find relevant information.

Categorizing and routing text messages

Idibon provides scalable natural language processing and text analytics to UNICEF's multinational U-report applications. Idibon's unique approach to text analytics combines human annotation with machine learning to process and sort each SMS.

Results for UNICEF and future steps

Idibon's collaboration with UNICEF has reduced the number of messages that U-report analysts need to read per day by a factor of ten.

Idibon is currently working on improving language detection to identify incoming text messages in dozens of local languages. Multilingual expansion of the U-report program will enable the inclusion of new demographics of U-reporters.